Burns and Burn Deformities

Serious burns are common in villages where people cook, warm themselves, or sleep by open fires.

**First aid for burns** is discussed in health care manuals, including *Where There Is No Doctor*. Here we discuss only the precautions that can be taken to help prevent deformities and disabilities from burns.

The most common deformities resulting from severe burns are contractures, and the scarring, or sticking together, of skin around joints. For example:

**TO PREVENT SCARRING TOGETHER OF THE SKIN AT JOINTS:**

Lupito slept too close to the fire and his blanket caught fire. He was badly burned under the arm and behind the knee. As he was healing, Lupito lay with his arm and leg bent. This kept the air away from the burns, and they hurt less. But as a result, the skin scarred to itself. After the burns healed, Lupito could not lift or straighten his arm or straighten his leg.

**TO HELP BURNS HEAL:** When possible, leave the burns open to the air.

If burns need to be covered, you can put petroleum jelly (Vaseline) on sterile gauze or sterilized cloth and gently cover the burn.

To help healing, and to prevent or control infection of deep or open burns, you can put bees’ honey or sugar directly on the burn. Or make a paste of bees’ honey mixed with sugar. **It is important to wash the burn with water that has been boiled and cooled, and to put on fresh honey 2 or 3 times each day.** (If the honey gets too diluted with oozing from the burn, it will breed germs rather than kill them.)
Ways to help burns heal faster and better

Skin grafts
Large deep burns heal very slowly and form ugly, stiff scars. Healing can be faster and scarring reduced by using ‘skin grafts’. A very thin layer of skin from another part of the body is stretched over the burn. Usually this is only done by a surgeon (although some village health workers have been taught how to do it).

RANGE-OF-MOTION EXERCISES
As soon as burns are covered with new skin or by a scar, gently begin range-of-motion exercises. Slowly straighten and bend the affected joint—a little more each day. For exercise details, see Chapter 42. If scarring is severe, you may need to continue range-of-motion exercises for years after burns are healed. Scar tissue does not grow and stretch like normal skin. Skin contractures often form and may slowly get worse—sometimes even with exercises.

Before beginning exercises, it helps to rub body oil or cooking oil into the healed burn (but never into a fresh burn). Reports from several parts of the world claim that fish oil on healed burns helps prevent thick scarring and skin contractures.

SURGERY
When joints are scarred down or severe contractures form after burns, ‘plastic surgery’ may be needed. Sometimes skin is taken from another part of the body and used to add more skin over the joint area (a skin transplant).

In case of severe burns that have destroyed fingers or thumb, special ‘reconstructive’ surgery may help to return use of the hand. (This surgery is very costly and usually can only be done by special surgeons in larger hospitals.) For example, if the thumb has been destroyed, sometimes a finger (or toe) can be attached to the end of the stump so that the child can grasp things better.

PREVENTION of burns is important:
Keep small children away from fires. Where there are open fires, be sure an older child or someone else watches the young children carefully.

Keep matches and explosives out of reach of children.

Turn handles of pans on stove so that the small child does not pull them.